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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [CA](#)  
SUBJECT: CONSERVATIVES STILL AHEAD FOLLOWING DEBATES

REF: A. OTTAWA 1293  
[1](#)B. TORONTO 288  
[1](#)C. OTTAWA 1258  
[1](#)D. OTTAWA 1216  
[1](#)E. OTTAWA 632

Classified By: Poloff Alexander Schrank for reasons 1.4. (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. The Conservatives emerged from the federal election campaign's two national debates having preserved their comfortable lead in the polls. Despite facing a constant barrage of criticism from the four main opposition parties, PM Harper seems to have come through relatively unscathed in English-speaking Canada. The Conservatives' chances of picking up significant numbers of new seats in Quebec may have receded however, thereby raising the bar on the possibility of an outright majority for the Conservatives. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) The leaders of Canada's five major political parties engaged in the campaign's only televised leaders debates over the first two days of October. The new more inclusive debate format put Prime Minister Harper mainly on defense, facing a relentless four-pronged attack. Despite being frequently interrupted, the PM was usually able to counter the opposition parties' punches with a list of his government's achievements. Harper came across far better in the October 2 English debate than the October 1 French debate, in which he seemed passive and at times even disengaged. Despite a strong opening performance in the French debate, Liberal leader Stephane Dion did not do enough in the subsequent English event to improve his party's prospects, according to the majority of local media analysts.

SEPARATIST BLOC LEADER WINS FRENCH DEBATE  
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[1](#)3. (C) Initial post-debate polling indicated that separatist Bloc Quebecois (Bloc) leader Gilles Duceppe, an experienced debater, did best in the October 1 French-language debate, which largely targeted Quebec francophone voters. PM Harper, clearly at a linguistic disadvantage, was on defense for most of the evening. Dion also delivered a surprisingly strong performance, offering a five-part "action plan" to bolster Canada's economic stability and regulatory framework within a month of taking office. Dion accused Harper of weakening the economy, while Duceppe alleged that the Albertan PM had provided tax breaks to big oil at the expense of Quebec's manufacturing sector. Duceppe also sought to capitalize on Quebec sentiment opposing the Harper government's cultural funding policy and its plan to get tough on juvenile offenders.

HARPER RECOVERS FORM IN ENGLISH DEBATE  
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[1](#)4. (C) In contrast to his performance in the French debate, PM Harper came to the English debate with guns blazing,

blasting Dion for "panicking" over the economic crisis by having announced a brand new economic program almost four weeks into the campaign. Dion replied that Harper did not have a clear economic plan of his own, and joined the other leaders in attacking him for failing to release the Conservative party platform. Harper countered that Canada's economy is in far better shape than the U.S., that the banking and housing sectors are strong, and that Dion's carbon tax would push Canada into recession.

¶5. (C) Dion also came under fire from NDP leader Jack Layton, who asked him how he expected to lead the country if he could not even lead the opposition. Dion meanwhile sought to position himself as a middle road alternative to the Conservatives and the "socialist" NDP. In the Green's first ever appearance in the national leaders debate, party leader Elizabeth May exceeded expectations.  
QEElizabeth May exceeded expectations.

¶6. (C/NF) Comment: The October 14 election will largely ride on who can best reassure Canadians of their economic safety, according to most polling data. While Dion presented a more credible argument than most observers expected, Harper came across as more composed, confident and experienced. It is uncertain how much influence these televised debates will have, though polling over the coming week should indicate whether and to what extent they swayed voter opinion or simply bolstered existing preferences. After 2.5 years with a minority government, the Conservatives appear to be on their way to victory, but for now their hope of winning a majority by picking up many new seats in Quebec appears less likely than just one week ago.

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